Who Were the Congressional Enslavers?

- Post Reprint: “More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation”
- Post Informational Graphics: "How the share of lawmakers who enslaved Black people changed over Congress's first 130 years" (As of January 2022 and as of February 14, 2022)
- Student Activity: Who Were the 1,739 Members of Congress Who Enslaved People?
- How I Wrote the Story: Julie Zauzmer Weil
- How to Read the Congressional Enslavers Cartogram: Adrián Blanco Ramos
- Post Retropolis Reprint: “The last enslaver to join the Senate, in 1922, was its first woman”
- Discussion Questions: Meet America’s First Female Senator
- Student Activity: Research Early Congressmen
- Student Activity: Is This a Story for Today?
Who Were the Congressional Enslavers?

On January 10, 2022, the online article, “More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation.” was published. The print article appeared Sunday, January 16, with 1,739 members of Congress confirmed as enslavers. For many months Washington Post reporter Julie Zauzmer had toiled over documents, census records, court cases and books to compile a list of members of Congress from 1790 through 1860 who were enslavers. Adrián Blanco Ramos, a graphics reporter; Leo Domínguez, designer and web developer; and a team of editors (copy, graphics, photography, data and design) worked together to create the accessible database and updates.

Resources in this guide that provide perspective include How I Wrote the Story by Julie Zauzmer Weil and How to Read the Congressional Enslavers Cartogram by Adrián Blanco Ramos. Students are introduced to a most unique member of Congress in the Retropolis look at history in “The last enslaver to join the Senate, in 1922, was its first woman.” Discussion and close reading questions are provided.

Students are asked to redirect their attention to the present, read quoted passages from the article and respond to questions in Is This a Story for Today? What policies, attitudes, decisions and laws are influenced by those of the first lawmakers?

The Post’s search began with 5,500 members of Congress. Research Early Congressmen guidelines encourage you and your students to accept The Post’s invitation. Individuals or groups of students are asked to research the list of unknowns to discover if other early lawmakers were congressional enslavers.
More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation.

As Sen. Daniel Webster delivered a speech about slavery on March 7, 1850, 46 of the 106 congressmen listening owned human beings. In all but one term for the first 30 years of the U.S. Congress, more than half of its members were slaveholders.

From the founding of the United States until long after the Civil War, hundreds of the elected leaders writing the nation’s laws were current or former slaveowners. More than 1,700 people who served in the U.S. Congress in the 18th, 19th and even 20th centuries owned human beings at some point in their lives, according to a Washington Post investigation of censuses and other historical records.

The country is still grappling with the legacy of their embrace of slavery. The link...
between race and political power in early America echoes in complicated ways, from the racial inequities that persist to this day to the polarizing fights over voting rights and the way history is taught in schools.

The Washington Post created a database that shows enslavers in Congress represented 37 states, including not just the South but every state in New England, much of the Midwest, and many Western states. Some were owners of enormous plantations, like Sen. Edward Lloyd V of Maryland, who enslaved 468 people in 1832 on the same estate where abolitionist Frederick Douglass was enslaved as a child. Many exerted great influence on the issue of slavery, like Sen. Elias Kent Kane, who enslaved five people in Illinois in 1820, and tried to formally legalize slavery in the state.

William Richardson, for example, a Democrat who fought for the Confederacy, died in office in 1914 after representing Alabama for 14 years. Another Democrat, Rebecca Latimer Felton, a suffragist and a white supremacist, was appointed to fill a Senate vacancy in 1922 and briefly represented Georgia at age 87. The first woman ever to serve in the Senate was a former slaveholder.

Enslavers came from all parts of the political spectrum. The Post’s database includes lawmakers who were members of more than 60 political parties. Federalists, Whigs, Unionists, Populists, Progressives, Prohibitionists and dozens more: All those parties included slaveholders.

By the eve of the Civil War, there were almost equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the 36th Congress, which prohibited the expansion of slavery in the northern half of the country, the House and Senate contained a nearly equal number of slaveholders and non-slaveholders, a Post analysis found. Almost twice as many slaveholders, 44 percent, voted against the agreement, compared with 25 percent of non-slaveholders. The law was crafted by a slaveholder, Henry Clay, who is so renowned as one of America’s greatest statesmen that 16 counties across the country are named for him.

When Congress voted during the Civil War on the 13th Amendment, which added a ban on slavery to the U.S. Constitution, nine men who had been slaveholders remained in the Senate. Just three of them voted to approve the amendment, while 35 out of 40 non-slaveholders voted yes.

Historian Loren Schweninger, who spent years driving to more than 200 courthouses across the South to collect records on slavery, notes the importance of lawmakers’ personal stake in slavery as they passed laws codifying the practice. “They were protective of the institution, that’s for sure,” Schweninger said of state and federal lawmakers’ relationship with
slavery. “There was brutality and there was all kinds of exploitation of slaves — but still there were laws.”

Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) said he thinks about that history in the halls of Congress, from the portraits on the walls to the votes once taken there.

“I’m very conscious of this as only the fourth Black person popularly elected to the United States Senate. … The very monuments you walk past: There’s very little acknowledgment of the degree that slavery, that wretched institution, shaped the Capitol,” Booker said in an interview. He added, “All around you, the very Capitol itself, was shaped by this legacy that we don’t fully know or don’t fully acknowledge.”

The same is true of the White House. Of the first 18 U.S. presidents, 12 were enslavers, including eight during their presidencies.

To Booker, those stories about his predecessors in Congress call for action from their counterparts today — namely, a bill he has championed that would commission the first national study on reparations for the descendants of enslaved people.

Without acknowledging the harm and trauma caused by slavery, both for the enslaved and their descendants, “it’s very hard to heal and move on,” Booker said. “We have never really tried, in any grand way as a country, to take full responsibility for the evil institution of slavery and what it has done.”

America’s atrocity was carried out not in shadow, but with extensive documentation, in carefully recorded censuses and court cases and wills. To create this database, The Washington Post researched all of the 5,558 men and one woman, Felton, who served in the U.S. Congress and were born before 1840, meaning they came of age before the Civil War. The verdicts on who enslaved people and who did not are based on journal articles, books, newspapers and many other texts, with the vast majority of the information coming from the 1790 through 1860 decennial censuses.

Today, as America struggles with how to understand its history and which historical figures to honor, many of these lawmakers’ statues stand in town squares across the country, and their names adorn streets and public schools, with almost no public acknowledgment that they were enslavers.

The men, women and children they enslaved are less recognized still, often recorded in a census by just their age and gender, without even a name.

The nation’s capital, like many cities, is dotted with reminders of these members of Congress. Rep. John Peter Van Ness of New York, an enslaver, has a D.C. elementary school, a street and a Metro station named in his honor. Sen. Francis Preston Blair Jr. of Missouri, who has a statue in the Capitol and a homeless shelter named after him in Northeast Washington, was an enslaver who opposed allowing Black citizens to vote after the Civil War. (The guesthouse across from the White House is named for the senator’s father, who was not a lawmaker but also was a slaveowner.)

Cities, towns, universities and other institutions across the country have started commissions to reconsider whose names should be on buildings and streets, and many institutions have removed statues and portraits because the people they honored enslaved others. But until now, there has never been a comprehensive list of slaveholding members of Congress.

This database helps reveal the glaring holes in many of the stories that Americans tell about the country’s history.

Rep. John Floyd, who ran for president in 1832, is described in historical accounts as an opponent of slavery who went so far as to raise the possibility of turning Virginia into a free state while he was its governor. Left unmentioned: Floyd, too, was a slaveholder. The 1810 Census shows he kept four people in bondage in Christiansburg, Va.

History remembers Rep. John McLean, an Ohio congressman and then a longtime Supreme Court justice, as one of two jurists who dissented in the notorious 1857 Dred Scott decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Black Americans were not citizens under the Constitution. Yet McLean was also one of the rare residents of free state Ohio who was recorded as a slaveholder in the 1820 Census, when he was serving on the state’s Supreme Court.
Determining who was an enslaver can be complicated. As recent revelations about Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and hospital and university namesake Johns Hopkins make clear, making a judgment about whether someone was a slaveholder based on the handwritten records of the 18th and 19th centuries is painstaking and imprecise work.

The Post initially concluded that 1,715 members of Congress were enslavers at some point in their adult lives, including at least one lawmaker who held Native Americans in bondage. Evidence suggested that another 3,166 congressmen did not enslave anyone. The Post could not find enough evidence to reach a conclusion about 677 congressmen when the article was first published online.

Since the publication of the database, readers have provided conclusive new information on more than 60 additional congressmen, in the form of documents ranging from enslaved people’s handwritten birth certificates, to newspaper advertisements placed by congressmen seeking people who had fled their plantations, to a letter one reader’s great-great-grandfather wrote home from a Civil War battlefield. As more information comes to light, The Post will continue to update the database.

Determining whether a lawmaker enslaved others does not reveal everything about his role in maintaining or questioning the institution of slavery. Some members of Congress who once enslaved people later freed them. Or take, for example, Sen. John A. Logan, whose statue sits on horseback in Washington’s Logan Circle for his exploits leading Union troops during the Civil War.

An Illinois senator and defender of the Union who was not a slaveowner, Logan worked as a state lawmaker to ban Black people from the state of Illinois and voted in Congress for the divisive Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made the federal government responsible for finding and returning those trying to escape bondage, even if they were caught in free states. But after the Civil War, the Democrat turned Republican changed direction, advocating as a senator for Black Americans’ civil rights.

The institution of slavery in America predated the first Congress by 170 years and was deeply rooted among the wealthy families most likely to send someone to Washington.

Multiple members of Congress were among the last slaveholding Northerners. Delaware elected two senators, Willard Saulsbury Sr. and George Read Riddle, who were both among the dwindling number of enslavers in the state in 1860. Riddle was one of just two slaveholders left in his county that year. Both of Delaware’s senators went on to vote against the 13th Amendment ending slavery.

Locally, more than 80 percent of the men Maryland and Virginia sent to Congress between 1789 and 1859 were slaveholders. Rep. John T.H. Worthington was listed as the enslaver of 29 people in the 1840 Census while he was representing the Baltimore area in the House. He sold his own enslaved daughter for $1,800 to a man who wanted her to bear more enslaved children, according to an account written by James Watkins, who managed to escape slavery.

Worthington’s daughter, whose name is not recorded but whose pious faith Watkins remembered, refused to consent to sex with her new enslaver. As punishment, she was beaten to death. Watkins writes that he sat beside her as she died: “She left behind her a bright testimony that she was going to that Saviour from whom it is impossible for all the American laws, and opinions, and prejudices combined, to keep back the soul.”

Many members of Congress played a role in such harrowing stories. Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved,” a cultural flash point in Virginia’s election this fall, is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who made the wrenching decision to kill her toddler.
rather than allow her to grow up in chains. One of Garner’s enslavers was Rep. John P. Gaines, a Whig who represented Kentucky in Congress from 1847 to 1849.

Knowing which members of Congress were enslavers could lead to changes in how American history is told.

Sen. Rufus King, a signer of the Constitution and an 1816 presidential nominee, gets a section of his Wikipedia page devoted to his anti-slavery activism. Yet until now, it was nearly impossible for a curious student — or perhaps someone who walks past the New York City plaque honoring him — to search the Internet and find that in 1810, King also owned a human being.

Or take the case of Celia, a 19-year-old enslaved woman who killed the septuagenarian man who owned her after five years of sexual abuse. She went to trial in Missouri in 1855 claiming self-defense. Judge William Augustus Hall instructed the jury that Missouri’s laws protecting women who resist sexual assault did not apply to Celia. Six years later, he was elected to Congress.

An acclaimed book on the case says that “Hall’s views about slavery are unknown.” It changes the story to note that in the 1850 Census, Hall reported enslaving four people, including a woman not much older than Celia.

For Crystal Feimster, a historian at Yale University, a full accounting of these stories from American history is essential to understanding America today.

“There is a way in which people want to disconnect and say, ‘I didn’t own slaves. My family didn’t own slaves. So let’s keep moving,’ ” she said. “We have to tell them why it’s important and why it matters and what it tells about where we are in this present moment.”

She pointed to voting rights, the vast racial wealth gap and the disproportionate impact of violence on people of color as examples of current-day struggles that spring directly from the history of slavery.

“What’s happening politically has deep roots in our political leaders’ investment in slavery and how they wielded that power for their own personal benefit,” she said. “People who don’t know that longer history can’t draw those connections.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article contains corrections made to the original story published on January 10, 2022.
How the share of lawmakers who enslaved Black people changed by state

Note: Some areas had representation in Congress before gaining statehood. Alaska and Hawaii did not become states until 1959. Sources: Washington Post reporting and Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.

Data as of January 2022
How the share of lawmakers who enslaved Black people changed by state

Western territories and states had few representatives in the 19th century, but some were slaveholders.

During some terms of Congress, states such as Louisiana and Mississippi sent only slaveholders.

Southern lawmakers left or were expelled from Congress during the Civil War.

Note: Some areas had representation in Congress before gaining statehood. Alaska and Hawaii did not become states until 1959.

Data as of February 14, 2022

Note: Some areas had representation in Congress before gaining statehood. Alaska and Hawaii did not become states until 1959. Sources: Washington Post reporting and Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.
### Who Were the 1,739 Members of Congress Who Enslaved People?

In “More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation,” you were introduced to some of the members who held enslaved people. The online database links to Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress where additional information can be gathered. Search additional sources to complete the chart.

After reviewing the information in the chart, select two additional members of Congress. Fill the chart boxes with their data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Congressman</th>
<th>John Floyd</th>
<th>Senator Francis Preston Blair Jr.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Party</td>
<td>Republican, Crawford Republican, Jacksonian</td>
<td>Free-Soil and Republican when Representative; Democrat when Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Represented</td>
<td>Virginia Gov., 1830-34, as a Democrat</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Offices Held and/or Profession</td>
<td>Physician; surgeon, War of 1812</td>
<td>Lawyer; Attorney General, Territory of New Mexico; Missouri State insurance commissioner, 1874 until death in 1875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Enslaved People</td>
<td>4 (1810 census)</td>
<td>“a few”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated Position on Slavery</td>
<td>Historical accounts describe him as an opponent of slavery. Supported Missouri statehood. When Va. governor, raised possibility of it becoming a free state. During his term, the Va. House of Delegates defeated a bill to abolish slavery and the Southampton Insurrection led by slave Nat Turner in August 1831 took place.</td>
<td>Opposed slavery and secession from the Union. Was broke at end of Civil War from his support of Union. During Reconstruction switched to Democratic Party; against allowing Black citizens to vote and disfranchising Southern Whites. Opposed extension of slavery into the territories on economic and moral grounds. Advocated gradual emancipation, followed by deportation and colonization of freed Blacks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How I Wrote the Story

Julie Fanzinger Weil

In the fall of 2020, shortly after a summer of protests for racial justice on the streets of D.C., Washington did something that a lot of cities have done lately: Local leaders published a list of buildings, parks and streets they thought should be renamed because of their namesakes’ historical wrongdoings.

As a local reporter covering D.C.’s city government, I wanted to learn why each historical figure was on that list. Many of the men listed were slaveholders. And late that night, I noticed that several of them had been in Congress. I googled, “Members of Congress who were slaveowners.” I was sure that a list would pop right up. It didn’t.

I scrolled through the Google results. There was no list.

In some sense, I knew that very night that I would make this list someday. Eventually, after months of research and months more working with my colleagues to turn that research into a searchable database, we published our story showing that more than 1,700 members of Congress were slaveholders.

The vast majority of my information came from U.S. Census records from 1790 through 1860. I read about each of the 5,558 congressmen to see where each man lived in a particular time, then tried to locate him in the census in the correct county and correct time.

Kansas and Nebraska were the very hardest states for me to research. First, unlike some states, there’s very little in the way of digitized records from the time before they became states (which is almost all of the years that slavery existed in America). And second, the legality of slavery was in far more dispute there than most places; the violence over slavery in Kansas helped lead to the Civil War. There were people moving in and out often, sometimes specifically in order to take one side or another on the question of slavery. Just because slavery wasn’t allowed at some times doesn’t necessarily mean a person didn’t bring an enslaved person into Kansas to try to change that. It’s complicated.

I hope many readers find the database useful, whether that means historians analyzing early American political decisions who download my data, descendants of both enslaved people and enslavers who are researching their own family histories, or residents of towns where those renaming debates are underway.

You can also help me complete this project. When I published my story, I knew that more than 1,700 congressmen were slaveholders, but I also couldn’t reach any conclusion about more than 600 additional members of Congress. Since then, Washington Post readers have sent me incredible documents: Birth certificates of babies born in slavery. Newspaper ads placed by congressmen seeking people who had fled their plantations. A letter one reader’s great-great-great-great-grandfather sent home from a Civil War battlefield. I’ve been able to make more than 60 changes to my database, and I’ve credited each of those readers for their work.

You can look for information too. You’ll find a list here, sorted by state, of every congressman I still need help researching. If you click on his name, you can read his biography and can find out whether there is a library near you that has his records in its files. That might be a good place to start. Or perhaps you can read a book or a historical article about the congressman. There are lots of records about slavery — wills, tax records, court cases, and much more. I look forward to hearing what you find.

NOTE: The list of “unknowns,” members of Congress who require research to establish whether or not they were enslavers, follows The Post’s reporting form. Please select a lawmaker from this list that is updated as research is confirmed.

Use this form to report what you have found.
How to Read the Congressional Enslavers Cartogram

by Adrián Blanco Ramos

You’re probably familiar with the U.S. map on the left, but maybe less familiar with the different kind of chart on the right called a cartogram. Instead of showing each state shape on a map, the cartogram gives each state a square of the same size.

The location of these squares tries to mimic the location of each state in the U.S. map. For example, we can find Florida in the bottom right corner of the cartogram, similar to its southeast location on the map.

A cartogram is more abstract than a map, but it presents some opportunities when charting information.
In this example, each of the squares or states contains a mini bar chart that shows the percentage of lawmakers who were slaveholders in that particular state over time. The percentage of lawmakers who were slaveholders in each term is represented in the vertical or y axis, while the horizontal or x axis represents time, congressional terms between 1789 and 1923.

The total number of representatives varies in each Congress as more states joined the Union. That’s why we decided to visualize the share of slaveholders to have a more accurate representation of how extended slavery was in Congress.

The share of slaveholders in Congress helps us explain the presence of slavery in context with the total number of representatives that served in each state. We decided not to show total numbers of slaveholders in the mini charts for a couple of reasons: First, it makes it hard to read the number of slaveholders in Western states as there were only one or two in a few congresses, while Virginia or Maryland had more than a dozen in early congresses. Second, it presents Oregon and Utah with very few slaveholders. That’s correct, but it’s also true that their representatives in Congress, though few in number, were mostly or entirely slaveholders in early years. This way, we are able to draw conclusions for each state and different periods of time. This is only possible thanks to the cartogram, where each state is represented by a square or a box of the same size.

What trends do you see in the charts for different states?

The cartogram gives you the opportunity to see more details of each individual state. For example, the bar charts show that during some years states such as Louisiana and Mississippi sent only slaveholders to Congress.

It also presents patterns in a more clear way. The gaps in the data in Mississippi or Alabama are an indication of Southern lawmakers leaving or being expelled from Congress during the Civil War (1861-1865).

Finally, as you can see, there are some boxes that are empty and do not show any bars for the time being. That means that The Post hasn’t identified any slaveholding congressperson in those states.
The last enslaver to join the Senate, in 1922, was its first woman

BY GILLIAN BROCKELL

Originally Published January 10, 2022

When Rebecca Latimer Felton took the Senate oath of office on Nov. 21, 1922, the press was there to capture every moment. She posed for pictures at her desk and received huge applause from the packed gallery.

The next day, she gave a brief speech and then stepped down. She had been a U.S. senator — the first woman to hold the office — for one day. Newspapers gave glowing reviews to her historic moment, calling her “grand,” “poised” and “dainty.” Some noted she also held another record: At 87, she was the oldest freshman senator in history.

None mentioned another historic title she held: Felton — suffragist, writer, political insider and avid white supremacist — was the last member of Congress known to have once enslaved people.


Born in 1835 to a wealthy Georgia plantation owner, Felton grew up...
surrounded by enslaved people, received other humans as property as a wedding dowry, and lived on her husband’s plantation, which was operated by enslaved people, for more than a decade before the Civil War.

After slavery’s end, Felton remained a strong proponent of white supremacy, routinely advocating more lynching of Black men, whom she called “beasts.” In her 1919 memoir, Felton described her youth on a Georgia plantation. Her family had been enslavers for generations, and one of her first memories was watching Cherokees being marched out of the area on the Trail of Tears. She attended private schools and graduated from Madison Female College at 17. The next year, she married William Harrell Felton, a wealthy doctor 12 years her senior.

Felton opposed secession, though her husband volunteered as a Confederate military doctor. The way she viewed slavery, there were “kind masters and cruel masters,” and the Civil War was a punishment from God for the sins of the cruel ones — namely, White men who produced children with enslaved Black women. “There were violations of the moral law that made mulattoes as common as blackberries,” she wrote. “The retribution of wrath was hanging over this country and the South paid penance in four years of bloody war.”

In 1874, Felton ran her husband’s successful campaign for Congress. Along the way, she gained a reputation: She was sometimes characterized as the brains behind her husband’s political operation, and sometimes derided for stepping “out of her proper sphere,” as the Savannah Morning News put it in 1879.

Felton’s husband served three terms before being defeated by a fellow Democrat in an election his supporters claimed included fraudulent votes. He and Felton remained powerful in Georgia politics, supporting the temperance movement and women’s suffrage.

In August 1898, Felton made a speech at an agricultural society meeting about the problems facing farm wives. The No. 1 problem, she claimed, was rape by Black men, and she endorsed a way to “solve” it: “[I]f it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts, then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary.”

Days later, Alexander Manly, a Black newspaper owner in majority-Black Wilmington, N.C., responded, writing that the rape of Black women by White men was the real problem, and that many White women had consensual sex with Black men.

Manly’s op-ed was used as a pretext for the Wilmington insurrection in November 1898, during which white supremacists overthrew the multiracial elected government and killed between 60 and 300 people. Manly barely escaped with his life; according to historian David Zucchino, Felton told the press, “The slanderer [Manly] should be made to fear a lyncher’s rope rather than occupy a place in New York newspapers.”

Felton’s husband died in 1909, but she remained a force in Georgia politics, particularly in women’s suffrage. (Few White suffragists openly supported Black voting rights; many avoided the issue, while others, like Felton, argued that White women should be given the vote specifically to help maintain white supremacy in the Jim Crow South.)

Then in 1922, Georgia’s junior senator died unexpectedly. It fell to Gov. Thomas W. Hardwick, a Democrat, to appoint a replacement until an election could be held. Hardwick also decided to run in that election, so he was looking to use the appointment to his political advantage. First, he wanted to appoint someone who wouldn’t compete with him in the election. He also wanted to curry the votes of newly enfranchised women; Hardwick had opposed the 19th Amendment, so he thought he needed to do something big to make up for it.

So he appointed Felton. For a few weeks, it appeared as though her appointment would be symbolic only: The Senate wasn’t expected to be in session before the election that would replace her. She didn’t bother traveling to Washington or taking the oath of office.

Then a couple of unexpected things happened: 1) The president called Congress to a special session to work on a ship-subsidy bill, and 2) Hardwick lost the election.

Seeing an opportunity, Felton kicked her campaigning skills into high gear, convincing the incoming senator to delay his inauguration so she could briefly occupy the seat. According to newspaper coverage at the time, even one objection from any senator could have stopped this plan, and a few of them had indicated they would oppose a woman on the Senate floor.

In the end, they stayed silent, and Felton was inaugurated as a Senate gallery packed with women watched and applauded.

The next morning, moments before she stepped down, she addressed her Senate colleagues, thanking them for their “chivalric” welcome and telling them that though she was now just a “remnant of the Old South,” she was “the happiest woman in the United States.”
Meet America’s First Female Senator

In 2022, 24 women were serving as U.S. senators. The first of 58 total female senators is Rebecca Latimer Felton. The Washington Post Retropolis article, “The last enslaver to join the Senate, in 1922, was its first woman,” introduces readers to her.

1. Before reading the article define the following terms used by Gillian Brockell in her article.
   - Avid
   - Deride
   - Enslaved
   - Enslaver
   - Lynch
   - Mulatto
   - Multiracial
   - Penance
   - Pretext
   - Proponent
   - Retribution
   - Slanderer

2. Who was the first woman to take the oath of office as a U.S. senator?
   - On what date?
   - At what age?

3. She has held the distinction of being the first ____________________________ and the last ________________ ________________.

4. How did Rebecca Lattimer Felton come to own enslaved people?

5. Felton was the wife of a physician who ran her husband’s campaigns for Congress. She was an advocate for the following principles. Explain what each one is in the 19th century and early 20th century.
   - Temperance movement
   - White supremacy
   - Women’s suffrage

6. In her 1919 memoir, what did Felton say was the cause of the Civil War?

7. Why did she advocate lynching?

8. Give two examples of her political involvement prior to 1922.
   - 
   - 

9. Why was Rebecca Latimer Felton appointed to the U.S. Senate?

10. If you could invite three deceased members of the U.S. Congress to dinner, would Rebecca Latimer Felton be one of them? Why or why not?

BONUS. Which three current U.S. senators would you invite to dinner? Why?
Research Early Congressmen

For many months Washington Post reporter Julie Zauzmer toiled over documents, census records and books to compile a list of members of Congress from 1790 through 1860 who were enslavers. Adrián Blanco Ramos, a graphics reporter; Leo Dominquez, designer and web developer; and a team of editors (copy, graphics, photography, data and design) worked together to complete the published project. On January 10, 2022, the online article, “More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation.” was published. The print article appeared in the Sunday, January 16, Washington Post with 1,739 members of Congress confirmed as enslavers.

The search began with 5,500 members of Congress. There are many who remain as “unknowns.”

The Washington Post is asking you to join the research team. You will receive credit for your discovery.

Go to “Help us identify members of Congress who enslaved people.”


Scroll down to the checklist of lawmakers still left to research. They are listed by state in alphabetical order. This list is updated whenever a lawmaker has been confirmed to have been an enslaver or as one who never enslaved people.

The chart on the next page is for you to compile the information you can locate.

Use the following guidelines as you begin your search of the “unknowns.”

Select a Member of Congress

Be sure to use the most recent list of “unknowns” found online.

Begin with the Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress

This digital directory provides a summary of the professional life of members of the United States Congress and the Continental Congresses since 1859. https://bioguide.congress.gov/

You can search by last name, state, session of Congress, position held and party affiliation.

Be sure you have the correct congressman. Several have the same or similar names.

He must be born before 1840 and represent the state in the list.

Use Additional Sources of Biographical Information

If you select someone from your state, visit a local historical society library, courthouse, and museums.

Among those files, you may find the lead or information you need. Look for cohabitation records in which the “owner” is listed. Maybe your family has old letters or diaries in which the congressman appears.

Chart Your Research Findings

Use the chart to document what you found and where you found it.

Be as specific as you can so others can locate the same information.

Confirmation of data is very important.
### Was a Slaveholder?

#### Name of Congressman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Is This a Story for Today?

The Washington Post created the first database of members of the U.S. Congress — all men but one woman who were born before 1840 and served in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries — who enslaved people. Of the more than 5,500 members, The Post has confirmed 1,739 who were enslavers, representing 37 states in the South, New England, much of the Midwest and some Western states. “Evidence suggested that another 3,166 congressmen did not enslave anyone,” according to reporter Julie Zauzmer Weil. Methodology, interviews and highlights of the research are found in “More than 1,700 congressmen once enslaved Black people. This is who they were, and how they shaped the nation.”

The following passages are quoted from the article. From this information some questions arise: To what extent did the ownership of enslaved people influence their actions as lawmakers? Does America’s involvement in both international and national slave trade engrain in American culture attitudes toward Black-White relationships? To what extent does America’s history as a slaveholding nation into the 1900s impact today’s policies and practices? Who should be honored with statues, school and university building names and street names?

Read the quotations. Select one to consider. You may respond to one of the above questions, using information from the quotation, the article and your research and experience, or you may write your own question and use the quotation in your response.

1

Enslavers came from all parts of the political spectrum. The Post’s database includes lawmakers who were members of more than 60 political parties. Federalists, Whigs, Unionists, Populists, Progressives, Prohibitionists and dozens more: All those parties included slaveholders.

By the eve of the Civil War, there were almost equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the 36th Congress, which met in Washington from 1859 to 1861. The Democrats, including those who belonged to Democratic splinter groups, counted nearly 100 slaveholders among their ranks, a Post analysis found. The Republicans, which had emerged as the party of abolition, had just one slaveholder.

2

The institution of slavery in America predated the first Congress by 170 years and was deeply rooted among the wealthy families most likely to send someone to Washington.

Multiple members of Congress were among the last slaveholding Northerners.
Unearthing the Past, Finding Roots | continued

3

When Congress voted during the Civil War on the 13th Amendment, which added a ban on slavery to the U.S. Constitution, nine men who had been slaveholders remained in the Senate. Just three of them voted to approve the amendment, while 35 out of 40 non-slaveholders voted yes.

Historian Loren Schweninger, who spent years driving to more than 200 courthouses across the South to collect records on slavery, notes the importance of lawmakers’ personal stake in slavery as they passed laws codifying the practice. “They were protective of the institution, that’s for sure,” Schweninger said of state and federal lawmakers’ relationship with slavery. “There was brutality and there was all kinds of exploitation of slaves — but still there were laws.”

4

For Crystal Feimster, a historian at Yale University, a full accounting of these stories from American history is essential to understanding America today.

“There is a way in which people want to disconnect and say, ‘I didn’t own slaves. My family didn’t own slaves. So let’s keep moving, ’ ” she said. “We have to tell them why it’s important and why it matters and what it tells about where we are in this present moment.”

She pointed to voting rights, the vast racial wealth gap and the disproportionate impact of violence on people of color as examples of current-day struggles that spring directly from the history of slavery. “What’s happening politically has deep roots in our political leaders’ investment in slavery and how they wielded that power for their own personal benefit,” she said. “People who don’t know that longer history can’t draw those connections.”

5

Today, as America struggles with how to understand its history and which historical figures to honor, many of these lawmakers’ statues stand in town squares across the country, and their names adorn streets and public schools, with almost no public acknowledgment that they were enslavers.

The men, women and children they enslaved are less recognized still, often recorded in a census by just their age and gender, without even a name.